

“The Key to Any ‘Ism’ is Momentum”
April 18, 2009 / 24 Nisan 5769
Rabbi Jay M. Stein

This week we will, once again, meet at Har Zion Temple so that in some way we can make sense of the unfathomable. We will gather together in the safety of the Dogole Chapel to hear stories and feel the warmth of the people who surround us. These are the same people without whom we could not make it, and we live in the safest of places and the most secure of times. Or are we? If the 20th century was the bloodiest century in the history of humanity, we were the greatest victims. This week we will gather, to remember and wonder aloud, about how we put our lives back together after such an event.

This week we will observe Yom HaShoah, in a program called, “*Voices of Holocaust Survivor Families, Faith, Memory and Legacy.*” Together we will hear how to transform trauma and live again because we know all too well what it means to emerge from the ashes. We know just what it means to be swallowed up by the enthusiasm of a people motivated by a charismatic leader, to deliver the most heinous of behaviors. The world tried to halt the unstoppable force of Nazism producing World War II because, once ignited, the thrust of this momentum was nearly impossible to overcome. Hitler, *yemach shemo*, was able to build the wave of momentum and convince his people that the insane idea of eliminating an entire race was the solution to all of their problems. By the time we are shown the masses of people in Heldenplatz, the Hero’s Square in Berlin, in March, 1938, Hitler had already announced that his birth nation had been transformed into the Third Reich ... and it was already too late. Ideas are important but not potent, until they gain traction. Once the damage is done, there is no way to turn it back and picking up the pieces isn’t enough. We must be careful, even diligent, to make sure the forces of evil are never able to advance and that fanaticism is never again permitted.

This morning, the story before us is a story with which so many are already familiar and, in fact, it’s the personal tragedy in Jewish history against which all other personal tragedies are measured. As we have come to learn, there is no catastrophe greater than the loss of a child. Unfortunately, it is the kind of disaster this congregation has endured more often than not. It is inexplicable and it is a circumstance that defies any understanding. That is why in the story of the death of Aaron’s two sons, Nadav and Avihu, the text is particularly silent about the circumstances in which their death was brought about because it just doesn’t make a difference. The reasons are irrelevant. However, we search nonetheless, and the rabbis expound. Rabbi after Rabbi, generation after generation, seek a viable explanation with the hope that we can figure out what happened. We are all engaged in this activity. We try to understand misfortune so we can avoid it because if we know where the landmines are, maybe we can side-step them. However, we know it doesn’t make any sense and, ultimately, we know we can’t avoid it...but that doesn’t stop us.

So, one Rabbi explains that the boys had too much to drink, another suggests they were too arrogant when they entered into the service of the tabernacle, and another offers a lack of true faith as the reason for their ultimate demise. Today, I’d like to add one approach to the catalogue of futile explanation because in some way it permits us a modicum of control, especially in times that seem hard to manage. The comment of the Mechilta suggests that Nadav and Avihu were

struck down because they entered the services of the tabernacle drunk. Drawing this conclusion from the laws that immediately succeed the event itself, I, too, suggest a contextual reading. Rather than focusing on the succeeding text, I'd like to draw your attention to the preceding text. So, if you would like, look at the Torah itself pages 632, 633 and 634. (Etz Hayim Humash) Chapter 10 is our story, but chapter nine sets the scene. As you can see from the subheading found on page 630, this chapter is devoted to the very first sacrifice offered. After months of build up, after the vessels had been made and the building constructed, the priests anointed that the time had arrived for the actual activity of the tabernacle cult to begin. The anticipation is amazing. For the first time since God's gifts had been given to the Jewish people, (the parting of the Sea of Reeds, the Exodus, the Ten Commandments,) and for the first time since the horrible act of infidelity of the Golden Calf, the Jewish people are able to give something back. This was the first sacrifice to God and it is an amazing event.

“And Aaron lifted up his hand toward the people, and blessed them, and came down from offering the sin offering, and the burnt offering, and peace offerings. And Moses and Aaron went into the Tent of Meeting, and came out, and blessed the people; and the glory of the Lord appeared to all the people. And there came a fire out from before the Lord, and consumed upon the altar the burnt offering and the fat; which when all the people saw, they shouted, and fell on their faces.” (9:22-24)

Va'yar kol ha'am v'yaronu va'yipol al pineihem.

When the people saw, they shouted because that is what a crowd does. That is what a crowd does when they are rapped up in the moment and that is what crowds do when individuals feed off the energy of others. We get caught up in it and that is what is most enticing about the religious experience. We love it when the music draws us in and we start to clap our hands and tap our feet. We love it when those around us start to yell out and sing with great enthusiasm. That experience always leaves us wanting more, but it is dangerous. It is dangerous because that experience, though enjoyable, cannot be sustained over the long haul and we are easily disillusioned. Secondly and maybe even more treacherous, ecstatic mass fervor permits individuals to relinquish personal responsibility and that is what may have happened.

It's not too hard to imagine that, after Aaron and Moses emerged and blessed them, the people, wanted more. Like the child bouncing on their father's knee yelling more, more, more, the Jewish people got caught up in the zeal and began calling for more, more, more. Nadav and Avihu were more than happy to oblige. Maybe they were the ones encouraging the people. Maybe they were yelling “Do you want more? Do you want to see another?” You can almost see them hold their hand behind one ear yelling “I can't hear you.” Then, that very fire consumed them. Maybe they just jumped on the bandwagon or maybe they got caught up in the fever, either way, this is not a story of creative religious expression. In fact, they lost their creativity and independent thinking and gave over their independence to the momentum. They lost themselves and their responsibility and, ultimately, they were held accountable.

Our history is replete with examples of fanaticism gone awry. In fact many “isms” do, including our own. Philosophical, political or moral doctrines, when translated into unyielding belief systems, generate a life force that is often uncontrollable and absolute and, therefore, intolerant at best and violently perfidious at worst. The problem is life isn’t so black and white and it’s difficult to determine the tipping point.

Nadav and Avihu got caught up in the moment and they dropped the fire. It spread quickly and they were consumed by it. That is what happens. If humanity could have just learned this lesson, then Nadav and Avihu would not have died in vain. They weren’t being punished, things just got out of hand. That is the danger of mobs and the mob mentality. They get out of hand, and then, it requires a leader to stand and stop it.

Look, I am not an alarmist, but things are certainly heating up. The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) on Thursday March 26, labeled a syndicated cartoon by Pat Oliphant which appeared across the US and on the Internet, as "hideously anti-Semitic" because of its use of "Nazi-like imagery and hateful evocation of the Jewish Star of David." The cartoon portrays a headless, jack-booted figure marching in a goose step with a sword in one hand and pushing a Star of David on a wheel with the other. The Jewish Star has fangs and is chasing after a woman carrying a child, labeled "Gaza."

Following the publication of the cartoon, ADL National Director Abraham H. Foxman said, "Pat Oliphant's outlandish and offensive use of the Star of David, in combination with Nazi-like imagery, is hideously anti-Semitic. It employs Nazi imagery by portraying Israel as a jack-booted, goose-stepping headless apparition. The implication is of an Israeli policy without a head or a heart. "Israel's defensive military operation to protect the lives of its men, women and children who are being continuously bombarded by Hamas rocket attacks, has been turned on its head to show the victims as heartless, headless aggressors." The Simon Wiesenthal Center also denounced this cartoon, which, it said, "mimics the poison of Nazi and Soviet propaganda."

It’s Hamas that’s gaining ground and building momentum. Paul McGeough (NY Times April 12, 2009), in referring to Kalid Meshal, the leader of Hamas writes, “Mr. Mishal’s calendar is so full that he might soon need a parking lot for the vehicles bringing foreign delegations to visit. My most recent appointment with him, on March 18, was pushed far into the night because Mr. Mishal was busy greeting a group of Greek lawmakers, who were then followed by an Italian delegation. In the preceding days, visitors had come from the British and European Parliaments.”

As Europe grows ever-more sympathetic to anti-Semitic tendencies, and as many of our college campuses grow ever more tolerant of terrorists and the governments that sponsor them, as the media grows ever more intrigued by the propaganda offered by hate mongrels and lovers of violence, we see that Hamas is gaining momentum, Hamas is gaining popularity, Hamas is gaining credibility. I pray we never arrive at this tipping point, for if we do many lives will be lost, more wars will have to be fought and the world will be even more unsafe. Abe Foxman, stands on guard. The Simon Weisenthal Center stands on guard...and so should we.